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SUBJECT: KUWAIT: PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGES AND PANDEMIC
PREPAREDNESS

REF: SECSTATE 67936

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Kuwait's top infectious diseases official has expressed concern about the possible effects of the current financial crisis on GOK preventative health care programs and the impact of GOK instability on health care delivery. During a meeting with the regional ESTH hub officer, he also discussed the GOK's pandemic influenza preparedness planning. End summary.

FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL CRISES -- HEALTH CARE DELIVERY
AFFECTED?

¶2. (SBU) During a meeting with the Department's regional ESTH hub officer on November 18, Dr. Musab al-Saleh, Director of the Disease Control Unit at the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health (MOH), noted that 75% of all health services in Kuwait are provided by the GOK. Although the MOH's budget increased from KD 300 million in 2004 to KD 900 million in 2008 (mostly for therapeutical care), the global economic malaise is now impacting the MOH. Planned construction of the new Jaber hospital has been put on hold. Preventative health care programs, which often take a back-seat, are having further difficulty getting traction. For example:
-- New preventative vaccine introductions such as the rota virus vaccine and the cervical cancer vaccine have been put on hold;
-- A national campaign for measles vaccinations for 1-7 year old children based on World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines is being scrutinized. This KD 300,000 campaign would typically have been approved by the MOH. However, now the Kuwaiti Council of Ministers' approval requires an audit of the proposed initiative.

¶3. (SBU) In addition to the financial crisis, al-Saleh said that ongoing tensions between the executive and legislative branches detract from MOH progress. There have been three governments in the past three years, including seven different Ministers of Health (with an average tenure of less than six months). This turmoil affects project approval and implementation. Al-Saleh noted that Parliament has also witnessed high-profile discord regarding GOK health services delivery: Ministers of Health are often the target of attempted "grillings," a process that led to the resignation of the first female Kuwaiti Minister in late 2007.

GOK PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

¶4. (SBU) There have been no reported cases of avian influenza in Kuwait since early 2006. After that limited outbreak, the GOK purchased Tamiflu stocks for one million people (note: Kuwait's population comprises approximately one million citizens and two million expatriate workers). Given Tamiflu's five-year shelf-life, the MOH will soon need to decide if further stocks are to be purchased; the cost would be approximately KD 4.5 million. Al-Saleh noted that this decision -- which needs to be made by 2010 -- might be impacted by the current financial crisis.

¶5. (SBU) The MOH has started delivering 100,000 annual influenza immunizations for higher risk population segments, and mandates immunizations for all pilgrims participating in the Hajj in Saudi Arabia. There are two infectious disease committees in Kuwait:
-- A technical executive committee comprising director-level representatives from the MOH, the Public Authority for Agricultural Affairs and Fishery Resources, the Ministry of the Interior, the Customs Authority and the Kuwait City municipality.
-- A ministerial committee headed by the Minister of Health.

¶6. (SBU) A national pandemic preparedness plan is in place with several sub-plans covering prevention, detection, laboratory testing, emergency care and longer term hospital

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care. In the event of a pandemic, the MOH projects the need for 400 additional intensive care beds and 3,000 additional hospital beds (including setting up field hospitals in tents). The last national pandemic preparedness plan review was conducted in 2007 and the MOH expects to undertake another such formal review in 2009. During October, a three-person WHO team spent one week in Kuwait reviewing the GOK's current pandemic preparedness plan and will provide recommendations shortly, according to al-Saleh.

¶6. (SBU) The MOH also engages in regional cooperation on pandemic preparedness through the GCC. A GCC committee meets every six months to review and discuss GCC-wide pandemic preparedness planning. Al-Saleh said that the GCC is considering a Glaxo Smith-Kline (GSK) proposal presented in October for the pre-purchase of a possible new H5N1 vaccine. The Government of Oman is currently representing the GCC in these discussions with GSK. A recent GCC recommendation called for the stockpiling of 10,000 Tamiflu doses for the first GCC country affected by a pandemic. Al-Saleh said that this stock would likely target Yemen, given that country's limited resources for pandemic preparedness planning.

¶7. (U) Note: Embassy Kuwait recently convened a meeting of the pandemic flu working group, comprising relevant Post personnel and four medical officers from U.S. military elements in Kuwait. Participants reviewed the Department's updated guidance on pandemic preparedness (reftel) and agreed to meet quarterly. Post is in the process of reviewing the actions items outlined in reftel. End note.

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